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Obama must rise to urban challenge

BY THOMAS J. SUGRUE

For the first time in three decades, we have a president who has pledged to put urban and metropolitan issues at the forefront of the national political agenda. Given the current economic crisis, and its devastating impact on metro Detroit, it's not a moment too soon.

For the past three decades, American urban policy has been a shambles. Beginning in the Reagan years, the federal government steadily cut spending on cities, while industry fled, infrastructure crumbled and populations grew poorer. Federal tax, housing and transit policies subsidized helter-skelter suburban growth, leading to the loss of farms, forests and wetlands, and to the rise of costly long-distance commuting. Meanwhile, cities were left to fend for themselves.

Without government support, cities turned to the private sector to address the most pressing urban problems. Urban development took two paths. One was splashy downtown revitalization geared to tourists, professionals, artists and well-to-do empty-nesters that gave downtowns a new lease on life. But the benefits of upscale development did not trickle down to the working-class majority of city dwellers. And the downtown bubble burst in cities from Las Vegas to Detroit, leaving an aftermath of vacancies and foreclosures.

The other path was forged by small-scale community development organizations, which grew out of the civil rights and black power battles of the 1960s and 1970s. With foundation grants and government support, they built affordable housing, community centers and, occasionally, stores. But overall, they did not transform the city. Community groups had the will but not the capacity to stem the massive urban disinvestment and depopulation.

Barack Obama -- the first president from a big city in more than a century -- comes to the White House with hands-on experience in urban issues. As a community organizer on Chicago's ravaged South Side, he saw the possibilities of community participation and empowerment, but the limitations of small-scale redevelopment.

As a budding politician, he attended fund-raisers in the city's gentrified North Side neighborhoods and worked closely with major downtown developers. And as a resident of one of the most segregated metropolitan areas in the United States, he saw the corrosive effects of the balkanization of Chicagoland into two metros: one mostly white, with good schools and public services, the other mostly minority, with failing schools, a decaying infrastructure and rising taxes.

President Obama's first urban policy steps have been promising. He announced the creation of a White House Office of Urban Policy, a signal that cities will be a federal priority for the first time in decades. The nearly \$800-billion fiscal stimulus package does not target cities specifically, but provides funding for school renovation and infrastructure improvements, public transit improvements and disadvantaged students and workers. The stimulus will certainly provide much needed jobs and help cash-strapped municipalities deal with years' worth of deferred maintenance.

And, though it has not been heralded as an urban program, the stimulus package's \$3-billion appropriation for medical research will provide a lifeline for the research and teaching hospitals whose viability is essential to city economies. Detroit, like Obama's Chicago and nearly every other

old industrial city, depends on its "meds and eds" -- that is, hospitals, universities and schools -- as an alternative to lost manufacturing jobs. They are the bulwark of today's urban economies.

But the success of the Obama administration's urban policy won't simply rest on its ability to solve the economic crisis. American cities and metropolitan areas are at a crossroads. Obama's urban policy has the potential to do much more than bail out cash-strapped municipalities. The new administration has a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reinvent cities and metropolitan areas.

That will require thinking outside the box. Downtown redevelopment has a place -- but it cannot be the cornerstone of a new urban policy, unless it is directly tied to job creation. Community economic development is crucial, but it needs to be done on a much larger scale -- and must include building affordable housing where the jobs are -- in the suburbs.

And, most important, planning needs to be regional, not just local. So long as neighborhoods compete with downtowns, cities compete with suburbs, and suburbs compete with each other for scarce resources, our metropolitan areas will remain divided by class and race and be economically inefficient.

The federal government has the power to provide incentives for regional collaboration. President Obama has long talked about unity -- about transcending the divisions that separate Americans by race, religion and party. It is time to include our metropolitan areas in that vision of unity.

The current crisis is a metropolitan one -- and the solution will come in policies that are appropriate to the scope and scale of the economic and social problems that we all face together.

THOMAS J. SUGRUE is Kahn Professor of History and Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania and author of "Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North." He will give the keynote address at the Richard C. Van Dusen Forum on Urban Issues at Wayne State University at 9 a.m. Friday, Feb. 27. The event, which is free and open to the public, will be in the WSU Law School's Spencer M. Partrich Auditorium, 471 W. Palmer, Detroit. Reservations are requested. Please e-mail: ak7579@wayne.edu or fax to 313-577-8800.